

Empowering Our Ministry: Working with the Holy Spirit (I)

Mark 2:18-22

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I'd like to begin this morning by mentioning a theological phrase that is bandied about a great deal by people when they get a bit beyond the beginning of the Christian life. The phrase is 'the kingdom of God.' It's a phrase that is used a lot in the Scripture. Jesus uses it as his keynote address by saying, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."

The kingdom of God is both present and future. In the future, God will rule in a way that is visible and obvious to everyone. This will take place in the end times, when Jesus will come again, something we proclaim each time we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion. Yet, in Christ, God began to reign in the hearts of those who came home to Him. Christians are those who accept into their hearts a living Lord, who 'brings with Him' the Holy Spirit. This reign of God in us is now, in the present. In a sense, Christians have access to the power of God, a power which will be fully revealed in the future. In that sense, we have with us, today, the presence of the future.

This is what the kingdom of God is about. It's an intrusion of a radically new situation into the midst of an old Hebrew faith. The old Hebrew faith was unbelievably important when it came to life. God spoke to Abraham, and then to Moses, and the journey back home to God began. The Old Testament served to prepare a people for the coming of the Messiah - it was the means to the end, not the end. But the old traditions had become comfortable, as things we know well tend to do, so the Hebrew people of Jesus' day resisted the new, and fought against the kingdom of God.

This is the story of the New Testament, the story of Jesus and the story of the apostles, the story of Paul and Peter and Timothy and John and all the rest. Within this story are many individual stories of how the power of the Holy Spirit and the love of God persuaded people to see the Holy God in the new kingdom. Of course, many people refused to accept this new kingdom. Some had become secular, had lost any semblance of faith, and so made their decisions about the entrance of the kingdom based solely upon political calculations. Others were deeply religious but unalterably stuck to the old Hebrew faith, and unable to see that God was doing something brand new.

The Gospel of Mark has only sixteen chapters. It was the first gospel written, around A. D. 70, probably fifteen years after Paul was martyred. It's language is abbreviated. It's not wordy. It paints pictures of Jesus scurrying from here to there, proclaiming this new kingdom of God. People often miss the fact that it's near the beginning of the third chapter that the religious authorities make the decision to destroy Jesus. So much for thoughtful reflection.

The last two verses of this section present twin parables of a garment and a wineskin. Like the bridal metaphor just before, these sayings about the new garment and the new wine describe inappropriate actions (using valuable new cloth to mend a

tattered garment; pouring still-fermenting new wine into worn out, damaged wineskins). The meaning of the two parables is quite specific.

If Jesus' disciples were to continue their old ways, they would be like people who put a new piece of cloth on an old garment, or new wine into an old skin. Since the new piece of cloth had yet to stretch with washing and drying, it would further rip apart the garment when it was first laundered. Since the new wine was still fermenting, the gases of fermentation would eat away at the thin leather of the old wineskin, causing a break, and spilling all of the new wine. Since Jesus had proclaimed that the time was fulfilled, and the kingdom of God was here, it was also time to adjust our ways of doing things. The new means that which is totally different; the new disrupts the old and bursts its mold.

On August 8, I gave the second sermon in this series, and spoke about the person of the Holy Spirit. You may recall that I explained that the Scripture talks about four basic tasks given to the Holy Spirit. The first is guiding people into salvation. The second is helping us become more holy. The fourth is building koinonia or true Christ-based community. The third is empowerment - giving us the power to do ministry and witness to others.

Something fundamental changed when Jesus came. The world has never been the same since, but most of the world and much of the church acts as if Jesus was nothing particularly new. That's our problem, but our problem can become a blessing if we're willing to see the problem and let the Holy Spirit work in us with all the power He brings to the table.

The Hebrew people came to hear Jesus preach but listened with ears half closed. They expected Him to say certain things. They were willing to allow an interesting twist or turn, here and there, but were mostly unprepared for an immense, radical intrusion of the power of God. And they mostly turned away, preferring the old stable traditions.

For centuries, their way had been led from the top down. Yahweh God had spoken to a few prophets or the king. They expected Moses to lead them, or King David, or Isaiah. Over the centuries, they had learned that they didn't have to think, they just had to follow. Even if their leaders brought them every day to a fountain that had only sand.

But when the kingdom of God came with Jesus, someone else soon came along as well. After Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, the Holy Spirit came to be with all of us, not just our prophets and kings. The ministry of the church became the ministry of all of us, not just our priests and pastors. The 'empowerment of our ministry' that is part of the sermon title of every one of these messages has to do with God giving power to you, and you, and you, not just giving me new ideas to present for your vote.

Just as our ongoing stewardship theme is the need of the giver to give for his or her own spiritual growth, the Holy Spirit continues to want us to take a bigger step than we've taken before, and ask for a larger piece of blessing. Boy, is He ever standing ready to give us what we need!

Some of the ministry we will do at CPC will come from the top (if there is a top), ideas the Spirit gives the pastor or the Session, but other ministry will come from the ground floor, where most people live and work. This is because this is the way it's supposed to work in the church, where every believer has the promised Holy Spirit to guide and direct. The question is whether we are willing to take God seriously, whether we are willing to accept the incredible notion that God continues to do a

new thing in our midst, and that we (individually) need regularly examine our wineskins to see if they are capable of holding the new stuff God has in the pipeline, whether the vision comes from the top or the ground floor.

This morning I want to highlight one such ground floor ministry. New Focus launched one year ago. It came from the Holy Spirit and was planted, as a vision, in the hearts of people who gathered for months and months to pray and follow what God was telling them to do. It may not be a vision for all time, it may someday be an old wineskin we have to set aside, but it is a vision for today. It's not the only example but it's a good example of how the Holy Spirit wants us to work with Him to do ministry and witness to the amazing grace we've been given.

To help you further understand New Focus and it's place in our overall ministry, I'd like to introduce one of the many New Focus volunteers, Mark Benish

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